

February 23, 2025 on Suicide by Durkheim

On the concept of suicide according to Durkheim, societal change influences the likelihood of committing such an act; whether flourishing or succumbing to societal deterioration. It is societal change that Durkheim uses to predict the suicide rate's highs and lows, and through societal change one can use sociological reasoning to grasp both the surface level and the substantial influences of emotion on the masses. Individual experiences are valuable in determining the outcomes of situation, though it is social pressure in the mainstream that promotes change—as Durkheim observed, often reflect as higher suicide rates.

Durkheim first acknowledged the rise in suicide rates as a means of elaborating the importance of sociology as a study, and did so by examining how demographic characteristics influenced reaction to social change, and subsequently why suicide rates differ between demographics after specific areas of social change. Social change here refers to a deviation from the typical, which depends on a society's specifics of being. Societies experience social change regularly—through economic, technological, revolutionary, or evolutionary means. Said changes show the healthy development of a society. Suicide as a sociological concept is reflected in these changes, and offers insight to the factors behind when different demographics are more or less likely to commit suicide. Durkheim theorized that certain demographics are more greatly affected by different social changes than others, and rise by proxy to two concepts: social regulation and social integration. The demographics Durkheim theorized about involve the arrangements of societies; those in tightly-knit societies have high social integration, those in entirely individualistic societies have low social integration, those in societies with intrinsic and culturally important social systems have low social regulation, and those in societies with very tight and authoritative rules have high social regulation. Altruistic, egoistic, anomic, and fatalistic suicide types follow respectively. Social integration refers to when a society promotes high connectivity, while social regulation refers to when a society is comparatively strict and domineering.

Altruistic suicides are those that take place in societies with notably high connectivity—thus the individual feels suffocated by integration, whereas egoistic suicide rates occur among notably divorced, individualistic societies—where the individual cannot integrate properly, and feels isolated from their community. Altruistic and egoistic suicides are the most common among modern society, and Durkheim's notation of the difference between the modern (organic) society type and the older (mechanical) society type in regards to social integration and social regulation effects; social integration tends to affect modern societies more frequently than social regulation does, thus it is important to note the stark contrast between high and low integration, resulting in changed suicide rates.

Part of Durkheim's reasoning for studying suicide as a sociological concept was the question of whether the act itself was a normal phenomenon, a typical aspect of human life in any environment, or a sign of a sick division of labor—a problem that needed fixing. He found individual case study futile for determining suicide's existence—as although he noted the environmental influences in specific instances of suicide, sociological study provided insight more important to the actions of the masses. As aforementioned, social change is most often a

factor of a healthy society. Changes in social currents are good for a society's overall stability and robustness. Frequent change reflects rebuilding, learning, and development of a society, and thus reflects its learned mechanisms, the structures that have changed only to be built stronger once more. Durkheim argues that normalcy does involve some instances of suicide, though he believes social change does not have to mean fluctuations in the suicide rate—that is, there must be a way to maintain the positive aspects of social change while not generating suicide fluctuations, which he considers abnormal.

Social institutions most prominent for influencing individual thought often fail for the introduction and promotion of other harmful behaviors; Durkheim credits religion for being prevalent and effective at molding social order and belief, though recognizes its failure in allowing the crucial practice of free thinking, and primary socialization—socialization via the family—is put at risk for the adoption of the same conditions affecting society at large during a social change. Durkheim suggests then that the failure of social institutions to mitigate the problem of fluctuating suicide rates required a different form of social phenomenon to act as a solution: the revitalization or reestablishment of occupational groups. This meant a creation of solidarity among workers—as modern society's division of labor complexities had allowed such altruistic and egoistic suicides to occur. The transition period between the mechanical to complex society type was most prominent in promoting the changes observed in predicting suicide rate fluctuations. Thus to Durkheim it was most crucial to identify why social institutions (such as that of religion) failed in stabilizing suicide rates involving social integration or regulation, and introducing the concept of occupational groups to address the phenomenon from what he perceived as its source.

The primary goal for Durkheim in his study of suicide types and fluctuations was to promote sociological study as a means of identifying the contribution of social factors to major phenomena often attributed to psychological or biological factors. Through the study of suicide, Durkheim examined the demographics most affected by social change, and how the fluctuations of suicide rates dependent on such change can be reduced as a social problem.

L. Hurst, A. (2018). *Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology*.